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Vicarious Trauma Exposure and Its Effects on Mental Health Among Adolescents and Adults: A Narrative Research Review

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ABSTRACT

A narrative research review was conducted on studies that have tested the relation between vicarious trauma (witnessing abuse of others; Trautmann et al., 2018) and mental health in adolescents and young adults. Using psycinfo to find research, results indicated that there are various types of vicarious trauma (e.g., domestic abuse, emotional abuse, and physical abuse) and various forms of mental health issues (e.g., post traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety) that might result from such trauma (Erolin, Wieling & Parra, 2014). Findings from this review also suggest that there is a relation between traumatic exposure and several types of depressive symptoms (Monfort & Afzali, 2015), and that there are more studies on adults than on adolescents. These effects will be discussed. Gaps in the literature will be referenced and potential future research directions will be acknowledged. In conclusion, this narrative research review emphasizes the importance of knowing the effects of vicarious trauma on adolescents and adults.

BACKGROUND

Vicarious trauma is a type of trauma that accounts for those that view (without necessarily directly partaking in) things such as: domestic violence, gun violence, emotional abuse and exposure to others' trauma via social media. In these cases, it is still very likely for those vicarious experiences to affect the mental health of those witnessing it. With an increasing amount of gun violence in schools and common places, as well as a continuing amount of physical and emotional abuse in the household, it is important that more research begins to be conducted on its short and long term effects on adolescents and young adults. This review, centered around the secondary traumatic exposure of adolescents and young adults, brings to light the known elements and limitations. Plenty of research has been found on direct exposure to trauma but there needs to be more on second hand trauma.

RESULTS: VICARIOUS TRAUMA EXPOSURE TYPES

Domestic Violence

- Witnessing marital violence as an adolescent was shown to predict future relationship violence in college aged women, showing longitudinal effects of vicarious trauma. (Maker et al., 1998).

Social Media

- A positive correlation was found between time spent on social networks and psychological distress (Monfort & Afzali, 2015).
- Wide-spread news about large traumatic events seemed to affect the mental health of those exposed to it. Those that spent more time on social media had increased exposure to such trauma (Monfort & Afzali, 2015).

Gun Violence

- In school aged participants, psychological symptoms of those exposed to gun violence was significantly more prevalent than symptoms of those not exposed (Slovak & Singer, 2001).

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Children who experienced intense and chronic traumatic exposure seemed to meet some criteria from the DSM-IV or met the full criteria that correlated with PTSD (Erolin, Wesling & Parra, 2014).
- It was found that there was approximately a 16% chance of psychological and trauma after vicarious trauma exposure (Yazdani et al., 2016).

DISCUSSION

Summary and Gaps

- Most research in this area is concerned with adults, and less has focused on children
- The majority of work is cross-sectional, limiting our knowledge of the effects of vicarious trauma across development.

Implications & Future Directions

- As existing work shows, experiencing vicarious trauma can cause lasting effects on psychological health. One way to help victims of vicarious trauma is to make sure schools have qualified counselors. School may be the only place children from abusive homes feel safe, so it is vital to have trained professional to which children have daily access. To accomplish this goal, specific courses should have to be taken in all states relating to childhood trauma and trauma-informed care.
- Research with therapists show the effects that listening to traumatic experiences has on their mental health (Benuto et al., 2018), which shows the increased need for research on the mental health of children who are exposed to trauma.

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